

# The Service Environment in Relationship-based Practice: “It’s Like a Community”

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The family service work environment has been linked to the parent–worker relationship (relationship) for many years. However, there is still much to understand about how the working environment and these relationships are connected. This paper reports on a small-scale qualitative study exploring the story of eight relationships between parents and family workers in four rurally based family services in New South Wales (NSW), Australia. Hermeneutics provided a way of examining the dynamics of the relationships, as it enabled an in-depth exploration and interpretation of the participants’ perspectives of how they experienced and understood the relationship. It became apparent that the work environment is an important influence on the relationship. New insights that emerged include the important role that staff not directly involved in the relationship (such as other family workers, supervisors, and administration and other professional staff) may play in assisting relationships. They also include the way in which flexible service delivery options support parent feelings of comfort, readiness to change, reciprocity, a sense of ownership to the service and need for support outside of planned appointments (both during and after intervention has ceased). These all support the development and maintenance of such relationships.

■ **Keywords:** relationship-based practice, family support, work environment, child neglect, working relationship, qualitative

## Introduction

Much research and theorising in the human services sector occurs around the safety, welfare and wellbeing of families. In Australia, much of the service delivery with these groups is conducted in non-government, community-based, family services (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2001).

Family services developed throughout Australia during the 1980s (Wolcott, 1989). They share commonalities with family support services models developed during the 1960s and 1970s in Britain and America. As these services developed throughout Australia, they adopted the philosophies, principles and eclectic nature of community movements such as the *friendly visiting* movement (Richmond, 1899/1969) and the community-based *settlement* movement (Wolcott, 1989).

There remains a strong network of such family services in New South Wales (NSW), Australia. The principles underpinning the practice of these services include: notions of universal support, social support, an ecological approach, strengths-based practice, being embedded in the community and highly responsive to local needs, empowerment and prevention (NSW Family Services Inc., 2009). The

most common programmes delivered by these services are: home visiting, information and referral, playgroups, parenting groups, centre-based support and counselling (NSW Family Services Inc., 2009). They operate as voluntary organisations; however, this occurs within a statutory child protection context. In practice, workers are clear that parent attendance is not mandatory; however, parents may initially feel that the threat of child removal is present.

While there is a long tradition and an accumulation of family work practice wisdom in Australia, it has not been thoroughly and extensively examined in an empirical way (Tilbury, 2005). For example, there is much to learn about how parents and workers work together; that is, what these kinds of relationships involve, and what supports or limits them. There is some agreement that the people directly involved in the parent–worker relationship (relationship), that is, the parents and workers themselves, affect the development and maintenance of the relationship. However,

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relationships are developed and maintained within a context that extends beyond the relationship itself, and it is highly likely that this context, specifically the team environment, exerts an influence over the relationship.

This paper seeks to fill some of the gaps in our knowledge about the nature of the connection between the work environment and the relationship. It describes the findings of an empirical study that examined the perspectives of parents, worker and supervisors on the nature of their individual relationships.

A number of themes and sub-themes emerged through in-depth exploration of eight relationship cases. These include perceptions of: how relationships in family work are developed, maintained and closed; the actions and attributes of parents and workers during the relationship; power dynamics that operate within such relationships and personal versus professional dimensions of such relationships (Reimer, 2010). This article explores an important sub-theme of the study; that of perceptions of how the work environment affects the relationship.

## Literature Review

Research that focuses specifically on how to achieve a work environment that supports the relationship in family-based practice is limited (de Boer & Coady, 2003; McMahon, 2010). This is despite comments made over 30 years ago on the importance of the connection between the professional environment and the relationship (Maluccio, 1979).

Previous research acknowledges how a supportive workplace team, in particular more experienced colleagues, can mitigate problems that may reduce the effectiveness of work in family-based practice (de Boer & Coady, 2003; McMahon, 2010). Some argue that the physical environment of the workplace, along with the client's interaction with general office staff, is an influential factor on impressions that clients have of workers (Maluccio, 1979; Weeks, 2004). This includes experiences of the referral and intake processes (Heaman, Chalmers, Woodgate, & Brown, 2007; Maluccio, 1979). During this period, negative experiences of initial contact with an organisation, particularly where there is rigorous and intrusive information gathering, can hinder relationship building (Heaman et al., 2007).

A flexible and relaxed, yet emotionally predictable and safe working environment has been found to help with building strong relationships (de Boer & Coady, 2003, 2007; Friedlander, Escudero, & Heatherington, 2006). Flexible work environments facilitate a range of service delivery options and encourage worker autonomy and spontaneity, which assist the relationship (de Boer & Coady, 2003, 2007). Flexible work environments also help reduce time pressures to build relationships and push families through the service quickly, by ensuring that an adequate length of time is allocated for workers to develop and maintain quality relationships which meet the needs of service users (Clemence, Hilsenroth, Ackerman, Strassle, & Handler, 2005; de Boer &

Coady, 2003, 2007). Such time pressures have been found to increase stress for workers (Clemence et al., 2005; de Boer & Coady, 2003; Tanner & Turney, 2003), which can lead to high staff turnover.

A supportive workplace culture increases worker satisfaction, commitment to the client and retention (Davys & Beddoe, 2010; McMahon, 2010). It does this by facilitating critical reflection, along with collegial support and understanding (McMahon, 2010). Davys and Beddoe (2010) argue that organisational culture may be more influential in levels of worker and client satisfaction than in supervision.

Further to this, McMahon (2010), argues that a supportive team environment, where service 'structures to hold on to the "knowing"' (or knowledge about clients) exist, is essential to continuing work with clients who may return to the service long after workers with whom they had relationships have left. This includes regular team meetings to discuss client progress, both positive and negative, as such regular communication helps build 'a rounded picture of the individual over time, [where] their potential for development or their deterioration is noted and addressed' (p. 149).

Finally, supervisors have an important role in maintaining a work environment that facilitates workers to feel supported to fulfil their roles and responsibilities (Kadushin, 1992). At an organisational level, supervisors can achieve this by ensuring a stable work environment, good practice standards, fluid systems and internal synchronisation between practice and policies. In addition, some argue that the supervisor's role also involves making resources available to meet service users' needs, where being under-resourced increases worker stress (de Boer & Coady, 2003, 2007; Waddington, 2002).

This paper reports the findings of a study that explored participants' perceptions of what affected their working relationship. During in-depth exploration of the findings, it became apparent that the work environment was an important influence on the relationship. The findings of the study generally supported the findings of previous research, which have shown that the work environment can both hinder and assist the relationship. In addition, some new themes have emerged with regard to the way in which the work environment affects the relationship in a positive way. The participants in the study have provided rich insights into how and why this is so, and those accounts are used throughout the study to illustrate the findings.

## Methodology and Methods

### Eligibility and Recruitment

Study participants came from four family services located in a regional area of NSW, with communities consisting of a mix of urban and semi-rural characteristics. The location was selected due to high rates of families experiencing issues common to families where child neglect is a concern. Such issues included social isolation, poverty, high

unemployment, a significant Indigenous population and a significant population of people living with disability (Vinson, 1999).

Recruitment involved accessing family services in the region and inviting parents, workers and supervisors to participate. Workers and parents were included because they were directly involved in developing the relationship. The practitioners' supervisors were included because they influence worker practice in a number of ways. Such influence occurs through supervisors' expectations and actions to mediate external pressures from funding agencies regarding throughput of work, intervention outcomes and the extent to which work occurs within certain norms relating to professional boundaries. It was anticipated that comparing three different perspectives on the experiences of the same relationship would ensure richer and more consistent and reliable information than could be attained by studying these relationships out of context and from one perspective alone (Stark & Torrance, 2004).

Parents were eligible if they had ceased working with the worker within the past 3 months, and their involvement in the service related to a concern of child neglect – where neglect was defined according to the NSW statutory child protection legislation at the time (NSW Department of Community Services, 2006). Workers were eligible if they had ceased working with a family who met the criteria within the past 3 months, and supervisors were eligible if they had supported an eligible worker. A retrospective approach ensured that the study focused on examining aspects throughout the duration of the relationship, from prior to the relationship through to its end. This was also important to ensure that there was no influence on casework by involvement in the study.

After case closure, parents who had been working with workers who had subscribed to the study were invited to participate. This included providing information on the voluntary and confidential nature of involvement, and explanation that, since the study was independent of the service, involvement or withdrawal would not affect future involvement with the service. When parents subscribed to the research, the worker with whom they had worked was invited to participate. The supervisor who had worked with the worker was also invited to participate at this time. This approach was necessary to conduct case-study research (Yin & Campbell, 2003), where each parent–worker–supervisor triad was considered to be one case.

### Participants

Twenty-one people participated in the study, discussing eight relationship dyads. This involved nine parents (where a relationship case involved a couple working with one worker), eight workers and four supervisors (where three supervised multiple workers). All but one parent and two workers were female. All but five participants identified as being Australian and of Anglo-Celtic origin, and one parent had emigrated from Ireland in the past 10 years and

one parent identified as Aboriginal. Furthermore, one parent and one supervisor identified as being from a Maori background, and one parent did not identify their culture of origin. Consequently, the findings may be both gender and culturally limited.

There was evidence of child neglect concerns across all cases, and it was common for all parents involved to experience multiple risk factors, both at commencement of the intervention and throughout. Risk factors other than neglect included difficulties with mental health (6), unstable housing (5), drug and/or alcohol misuse (5), domestic or family violence (4), homelessness (2), limited and, at times, aggressive and unsupportive relationships with extended family (2), and intellectual disability (1). Six parents had been involved with a statutory child protection agency at some time in their past. This included recently, when three parents experienced current intervention due to child removal and one feared this would occur. In addition, two parents lived in out-of-home care as children. Furthermore, despite the family work occurring in a statutory child-protection context, the focus of the study was the parent and worker relationship. Matters relating to children were tangential to the study focus, hence the presence of children is relatively absent from the findings.

The workers all had tertiary (a mixture of university and vocational) degrees in areas such as community work, welfare, social work, social science, counselling and nursing. They had from 2 to 20 years' experience in family work, along with collective previous professional experience in fields such as social and welfare work, nursing, midwifery, youth work, drug and alcohol, mental health, disabilities, accounting, administration and construction. In addition, three of the four supervisors had previously been family workers themselves, with their length of experience of managing family services ranging from 2 to 12 years. The other supervisor had over 15 years' experience in both service provision and management of community-based early childhood services, along with approximately 2 years managing family services.

### Procedure

Once the University of South Australia Human Research Ethics Committee provided ethics approval, qualitative research methods were utilised to collect and analyse the data (Stark & Torrance, 2004). Participants were asked to *tell the story* of the relationship during in-depth semi-structured interviews (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1995). The author, who was the sole researcher, conducted all of the interviews, which ranged in duration from 45 to 90 minutes. They involved exploration of how participants experienced the relationship dyad, including their perception of the purpose, value and meaning of the relationship. This approach was taken after examination of the literature, which has shown that there are three basic phases to the relationship, that is beginning, middle and end (Heaman et al., 2007),

but that little in-depth examination of these phases has occurred.

Interviews took place as soon as practical after completion of parents' involvement with the service. The author interviewed each participant individually, with the exception of one parent-couple (who were interviewed conjointly). Each participant was interviewed once about each relationship with which they were involved. Three of the four supervisors were involved in a number of interviews (dependent on the number of workers they supervised who were involved in the study); however, they spoke about each relationship in which they were involved only once. While parents were remunerated to the value of A\$40 for costs associated with attending the interviews, workers and supervisors were not remunerated as their interviews took place during paid work time. In addition, since the communities within which these services are located are relatively small, the service locations remain undisclosed to protect participant privacy and confidentiality.

The author digitally recorded, transcribed and analysed each interview. The author's primary supervisor provided an internal reliability check for each transcript (Bryman, 2004). Hermeneutics (Kögler, 1999) provided a way of examining the dynamics of the relationships, as it enabled in-depth exploration and interpretation of the participants' perspectives of how they experienced and understood the relationship. The de-identified data were inductively analysed (Denzin, 1978), along thematic lines (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes included identifying key words from the text relating to the concrete *actions* and *attributes* of the parents, workers and supervisors involved in the relationship dyads. Other themes related to who was speaking, who was being spoken about, the relationship phase, other contextual factors, and the perceived purpose, value and meaning of the relationship. NVivo qualitative software (Bazeley, 2007) and a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet facilitated the analysis. The spreadsheet enabled close examination of patterns that emerged regarding the themes and participants' perceptions of those themes, where disconfirming evidence, in particular, stood out clearly. This approach presented a way to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality, simultaneously allowing accurate representation of the data collected.

## Findings

### Elements of Supportive Work Environments

Establishing and maintaining a culture and ethos in the service that enabled feelings of safety, informality, flexibility, personalised practice and professionalism appeared important for good relationships. Supervisors, in particular, talked about a culture that values informality, honesty, respect and empowerment practices, and where strengths are celebrated.

"[The service building is] not an office. It's not somewhere where we say, 'You sit there' and then you go into this sterile room which is tried to be made friendly by staff. I mean, this is a crappy old house. And it's falling apart. And it is probably

on a similar level to most people's homes . . . It's not a scary environment. For people who use it a lot . . . that comfort level of being able to come in. Sometimes [Emily] would rock up – other clients do it too – half an hour or an hour before they are meant to. Only because they know they can go out the back. They can make a cup of coffee. They can sit out there. They can do whatever they damn well please. And that's okay. No one is going to rouse on them . . . This is almost like their stomping ground just as much as it is ours." (Supervisor 2)

A number of specific factors emerged which supported a service culture and ethos that supported the relationships. These included flexibility, parents' positive first impressions and experiences of intake procedures, and how general office staff, parents and supervisors assisted the relationship.

**Flexibility.** Participants reported that a flexible working environment helped the relationship. Flexibility involved being mindful that, as long as the focus of the work remained fixed on parent change, including improvements in parenting approach, much of the way in which workers worked with the parents was negotiable. More specifically, this involved unspecified time limits to work with parents; negotiable casework duration, and numbers and times of meetings; multiple options for where work took place and the practice approach used; and not being rigid about what parents and workers discussed, and what workers would help with.

Having unspecified limits on the duration of casework helped because it made it possible to meet the parent's needs when the parent was ready. In addition, some parents noted that it was important that workers spent some time getting to know them personally, as it helped them feel like a person rather than a client with no identity or humanity. In addition, a flexible approach to time meant workers could provide alternatives that met the needs of families at any given time. For example, one parent talked about the value of being able to see the worker weekly during a particularly difficult period, and a worker discussed the way in which being able to 'juggle [her case] load' helped her better meet families' changing needs.

The workers were able to conduct their work in a number of locations, including the service centre, parents' homes, other organisations and public spaces in the community. They were also able to utilise a range of practice approaches, drawing on different theoretical frameworks for practice. Providing a range of options for where work could take place, and the approach used, supported a sense of empowerment amongst parents, because they could choose some aspects of the process and be involved in decision making. Feeling empowered was particularly supportive of the relationship as it contributed to a collaborative relationship environment. Adopting an eclectic practice approach, rather than a predetermined practice formula, also enabled the workers to tailor the service to the parents' unique needs and worldviews.

Furthermore, working with parents in a group setting emerged as an important way for parents to become familiar with the worker and service in a potentially less threatening situation than during individual work. Group work reduced pressure on relationship building in instances where parents were not ready to trust an individual worker in highly concentrated contact. Furthermore, it helped these parents build support networks and relationships with others. An example of this was a relationship for which group work was specifically used to develop the relationship that had previously been slow to get started, and was intermittent. The parent described the way in which her trust and respect grew as she watched, from a “safe” distance, the way the worker conducted herself. This “gave [the parent] the opportunity to see the sort of person that [the worker] was”. She was clear that the relationship subsequently developed quickly and became very strong. The worker in this case also spoke about the important role that the group played in assisting the couple develop trust, and consequently smoothed the path to building the relationship.

“I was facilitating the [group] parenting program . . . I think it built up a lot of trust. They started to feel comfortable in coming. But more than that, I think their confidence in themselves really grew . . . That she could come to something and sit in a room full of people and be accepted, and feel comfortable in that process . . . And I remember running into them down town. Probably about a week after the parenting program-. And I saw them coming towards me. And they just looked so happy to see me. I thought, ‘Wow! They’re comfortable now. They’ve made that connection and they’re happy to keep that connection.’” (Family worker 1)

Worker flexibility also involved being prepared to discuss a diverse range of issues, life experiences and interests; and being able to pitch communication at a level the parents could relate to and understand. According to some workers, an important aspect of building a working relationship involved talking broadly about many life issues prior to the parent feeling trust for the worker and being prepared to focus on the referred issues. Flexibility also involved workers accommodating parents by putting aside their work roles and needs at times. Participants described this as “stepping outside that description or brief”, and outside “programme parameters”, to meet parents’ needs even when they were not specifically related to parenting issues. In one case, this included a parent in an established working relationship not changing to an alternative programme within the agency, despite her needs sitting outside the funding specifications for the programme. Such flexibility is an example of the service putting the needs of the parent, and the relationship, before agreements with funders about what particular programmes were supposed to provide.

Another element related to flexibility and safety is the voluntary nature of the service model. This is despite being embedded in the statutory child protection system in NSW, which is skewed towards child protection responses instead

of early intervention and prevention. Interestingly, the service staff used this systemic condition as a way to establish rapport with apprehensive parents. For example,

“One of the strengths that family support programs have got is that they are voluntary and not mandatory. So even if families come to us and are mandated by DoCS, they will often be really annoyed about that and not really wanting to enter into the spirit of co-operation . . . I always say to them, ‘Well, as far as I’m concerned, you come here because you want to. We’re a voluntary service’. So I explain the difference between voluntary and mandatory. And it’s like that takes a real pressure off people. And they feel like they’ve got a choice.” (Family Worker 1)

In reality, parents were attending the service because of an imposed or threatened action of child protection intervention (such as removal of their children), but these workers managed to avoid association with this activity because of a voluntary service principle and flexible and friendly work environment.

In addition, a flexible service culture has a flow-on effect to workers’ relationships with clients; especially in terms of creating a sense that appointment times were not always necessary and that parents could *drop in* to see the worker as they required.

“I think this service, as a whole, for them, was an okay place to come. And sometimes, they would trot in, all of them – mum, dad, the whole lot of them – come in here and have a chat. And I would have a chat. Whoever was here would have a chat. Just to see how things were going.” (Supervisor 8)

This type of culture also created a safe and comfortable place for parents within the community, where a number of people reported that it provided parents’ with a space away from what was often a chaotic family home. In addition, to accommodate the level of flexibility described, and partly influenced by the empathy and trust that had developed between the parent and worker, the services facilitated a practice whereby parents could return to seek support if they felt they needed to. This “open door policy”, as it was termed by workers and supervisors from three of the services independently of each other, was encouraged by the supervisors and was consistent with family work principles of supporting families’ needs in collaborative and empowering ways. Even parents who did not make use of this policy appreciated it, as they felt empowered to continue to try new things because of the reassurance of potential support. This idea was described by one parent when discussing her experience of living after having finished working with the worker. She said,

“It’s like being a tightrope walker, and it’s like, there’s a net. It doesn’t matter how many times you can do it and get away with it, you know that they’re there. You know, that if you fall, that they are there. And that’s, it’s really important to me being a single mum, that I’ve got that for me. Because then I know that [my son is] safe.” (Parent 3)

Another aspect of the service environment that supported flexibility was a team approach to parents who used the service. This involved an expectation that the parents were ‘the service’s clients’ and, rather than being exclusively the client of one family worker, other staff at the service were involved sometimes in support the work. For example, when asked “How does bringing the team in [help with the relationship]?”, one supervisor explained,

“It’s no longer the one person coming up with how we can support this client . . . It’s all of us thinking about this one person . . . We all know Emily. And I guess that that’s what’s so probably unique about the services. We do know all our clients even though they might not know that . . . Let’s work as a team here even though it’s that caseworker’s job to implement it.” (Supervisor 2)

While the family worker was not always available, the nature of the relationship with the service, and the flexible service environment, meant that others were available to meet parents’ needs. Some of this flexibility was also displayed by parents who were not rigid about seeing their worker exclusively.

Being flexible and available in this way helped the workers to be able to respond quickly to parents’ needs and requests, as well as to assist these parents to initiate contact and obtain support. This was very important, as it meant that the parents could initiate contact with workers if they decided they needed help, in particular emotional and social support, as well as accessing a safe place outside of the home.

**First impressions.** The study demonstrated how a friendly and welcoming family service environment can evoke positive first impressions for parents, which can assist the building phase of the relationship. Genuine friendliness and acceptance was a part of the ethos of the services. Four parents commented on the positive effect that other family service workers, including administration staff, had on the building stages of the relationship. The parents who made comments about this effect perceived the culture of the family service to be friendly and welcoming as well as relaxed, supportive and responsive to their needs. This type of introduction to the service reduced the nervousness they said they were feeling about meeting and working with the worker. This idea is summed up the following way by one parent,

“[My first impression of the service was that] I was pretty nervous, and didn’t know what to expect when I first walked in. It actually made me feel like turning around and walking back out . . . Then once [the reception staff] started talking and, it’s just the way they greeted you when you walked through the door. [Like] ‘Hi. How are you?’ And introduced themselves and, I guess just to make you feel more welcome and more relaxed walking into somewhere that you hadn’t been. It’s just the big smiles they’ve got on their faces all the time. It just brightens your whole day when you see that they’re all happy and talking to you.” (Parent 2)

**Intake procedures.** The study also found that focusing on extensive data gathering during the first session could hinder building the relationship. Participants argued that a better approach to both assess the parents’ needs and begin building the relationship included using *intake* as an opportunity to connect with the parent. In doing so, they reported it was more respectful, equalising and empowering than starting the relationship with a series of intrusive questions and paperwork. While supervisors reported supporting this approach, two reported struggling with it. This was related to an underlying tension between deciding what was best for the parent, and what was best for the service (for example, needing an overview of the household and its potential risks in relation to worker safety).

### Who provides such a context?

“To know that they are here is a nice feeling because this is a nice environment to come into. Even so far as recognising the receptionist. And the friendliness. There’s no attitude. You can phone up customer service at the bank and you’ll get attitude the minute they answer the phone. You phone up here and it’s a friendly voice. And it’s someone who’s got a positive nice attitude. A few people that I’ve met through here in those situations, I’ve seen outside of the centre and I’ve spoken to them. And the worst thing about it is I don’t remember their names. And I get really embarrassed because they remember me. And we stand there and we can talk for ages. As if we’re friends and we didn’t meet through the centre. It’s like a community.” (Parent 5)

This study found that parents’ initial experiences of other service staff, such as administrative staff, helps build the relationship. Most parents reported that family service staff other than the parent’s specific family worker engaged with them. This included administration staff, other professionals performing both family work and non-family work roles, and supervisors. These other staff were considered friendly, caring, honest, respectful, informal, and they focused on parents’ strengths and acted in ways that empowered parents.

Some parents reported that this type of approach by other staff at the family service helped the developing relationship with the worker. It was especially important that all service staff, including administration staff and management, display such behaviour, as it helped to reduce the parents’ apprehension about engaging with the worker, and to increase their willingness, sense of trust and sense of feeling safe. Having their needs met by a number of people, including the need for social support, was said to help the relationship, as parents felt ‘listened to’ and received a quick response. Furthermore, workers did not feel over-burdened by feeling they were the only source of support for the parents.

Furthermore, some parents and supervisors involved in the study reported on the way in which they grew to feel part of the service, and that the service became such an important dimension in their lives that they wanted to assist

the service in some way. This manifested for some parents in feeling a sense of belonging and deep commitment to the service. Some of the supervisors described this as parents developing a sense of ownership of the service. For these parents, the relationship involved some reciprocity. Some supervisors reported how the parents acted on this sense of ownership and appreciation for the impact of the service on their lives, and voluntarily engaged in activities they perceived were helpful, such as fundraising or maintenance, for example,

“She then started to do all these things . . . She made these little wooden stools things, and the table outside, and she was doing things. And she’d run around and got all donations for people for presents for the kids for the toys . . . The motivation, I presume was because that was her thanks, and her gratitude. She really was quite pleased and grateful that she’d had an opportunity to come to a place where she was heard. And that some progress had been made.” (Supervisor 7)

The services accepted and valued these acts of appreciation, care and reciprocity by allowing opportunities for the parents to give back to the service in these kinds of ways. This would not have been possible without the informal and flexible ethos and service environment.

Finally, factors relating to the influence of supervisors on the relationship are covered in greater depth elsewhere (Reimer, 2010). However, briefly, participants commented on the important role the supervisor played in encouraging, supporting and ensuring the type of work environment and culture described. This also included a high presence and involvement by supervisors. For example,

“I pretty much know all of the families . . . I know who they are. I know their names, so at least I can say ‘G’day Liz.’” (Supervisor 8)

## Discussion

The study provided evidence for the way flexible service delivery options assist the relationship, where previously there was only limited evidence. This includes developing a work culture that facilitates good first impressions for families and is friendly, flexible and relaxed. To offer a range of services in the personalised, familiar, flexible and relaxed environment described, services may need to plan for flexibility in the workplace so that parents can still access support if their worker is not available. Other workers may need support to build some level of relationship with the parent, as this seems to reduce pressure on the relationship with the primary worker, and helps the parent feel comfortable with the service more generally. This also involves being able to offer home visiting or centre-based work along with groups and drop-in space. Furthermore, this may mean the service involving itself in community activities and promoting itself as a service for all of the community. In this way, parents may

become familiar with the service and staff before engaging on a one-to-one level.

In addition, it is important for staff to have a presence at the service during business hours. A constant presence by family workers may not be reasonable or possible, therefore administrative staff should be equipped to fill the gap and be the initial face of the service. Administrative staff should, therefore, be able to greet parents and help them feel comfortable prior to their being seen by another staff member who can meet their needs.

Another important aspect of flexibility is related to time. Access to support at times that parents needed it, as opposed to fixed appointment times, was important. The services that took part in this study appeared to meet this need by offering a *drop-in* service. Workers needed support to be flexible and to fit in with parents’ readiness to change, rather than be locked into fixed appointment times and duration for service provision. This seemed to reduce pressure on relationship building and the process of parental change, because both the parents and workers could concentrate on the issues, rather than the length of time remaining.

Another way the services supported and empowered parents was by providing scope for them to contribute to the service in some way. This aspect of connectedness and parent reciprocity has received little attention in the literature. What is also interesting is that the services accepted and valued these acts of appreciation, care and reciprocity. This would not have been possible without the informal and flexible ethos and service environment. Such a sense of ownership and desire to show appreciation by doing acts of service, indicates a different perception of the service environment to that of parents in a study by Ribner and Knei-Paz (2002), who reported that the parents experienced the service environment as ‘heartless and faceless institutions’ (p. 385).

Encouraging people to *drop in* was one key example of a flexible, welcoming and informal environment provided by these services. Parents found it helpful in maintaining an emotional connection with the worker after their individualised casework time had ceased. It also meant they felt supported by the service as a whole, and not just an individual worker. This provided a preventive measure in helping parents to maintain and continue to build capacity. A difficulty with this approach, however, is that the family service is a workplace, and it can be difficult to provide a space where parents can relax without disruption to staff and other parents, and maintaining the privacy and confidentiality of others. For staff to be able to engage, and be available in the way described throughout this study, requires time and resources. This has implications for governments and other funding bodies, with the most costly resource being people.

One of the primary goals of the family services involved in this study is to help parents develop the social support available to them. Although not tested directly, it became apparent that the relationships facilitated ongoing social

support for such parents. This confirms an understanding that families need continuity of assistance for the whole of life (Zigler & Berman, 1983). It is likely that families who are excluded from normal kith and kin networks that typically provide support throughout the lifespan, as is often the case with families where child neglect is a concern, will need to draw on such formal support in an ongoing fashion. This was found to be the case in this study, where the relationship and the service more widely, were seen to play an important part in providing this support. However, these services did not receive funding to do this in an ongoing fashion. Rather, they provided this because of a longstanding principle of encouraging and valuing ongoing contact and providing for families' social support needs (Zigler & Black, 1989). This created stress on the workers, supervisors and services given that the resources were inadequate to enable them to extend the service, while at the same time their professional ethos did not allow them to turn parents away easily.

Services addressing this need, therefore, require better resources to provide some type of drop in dimension to their service. The study challenges traditional funding methods, which are focused on project-specific finite interventions rather than on potentially unlimited, albeit usually sporadic and less intense, ones. Current funding for family services in NSW does not support the flexible nature of the type of work described throughout this study. Thus, while family services adopt flexibility in approach to providing services based on the principles outlined in this paper, their application of government funding is incongruent with the funding model.

The way in which relationships assist the type of approach described here presents a challenge to governments and funding bodies with regard to matching funding with best practice. Policy can support the development of such relationship-based practice by being more flexible regarding the nature of interventions, but this would require rethinking about how service use and funding should be conceptualised. Furthermore, policy makers can affect client-service relationships by providing funding frameworks that enable the conditions for such relationships to flourish. Along with the ideas already raised, this may include funding arrangements that provide greater security for organisations to offer longer-term staff positions which facilitate permanency, rather than casual employment of the workforce and high staff turnover. Studies of the long-term cost effectiveness of different funding and service models will obviously be necessary to support such a shift.

It also seems important to establish a work environment where workers can utilise the expertise of other professionals. This will require time to build and maintain relationships with other professionals, and a culture of open dialogue where professionals value each other and a personalised approach. There is also the matter of other staff, such as administration and management, who provide the kind of working environment that supports the types of relationships being studied. They may benefit from inclusion in in-service education that addresses these issues.

This paper highlights the necessity and importance of further research, including a more detailed examination of the association between the relationship and many aspects of the work environment. Areas ready for exploration include: systems to welcome and assess new parents; the physical environment; the role of general service, management and supervisory staff; systems relating to flexible service delivery and service delivery options (particularly the use of group work to enhance building relationships in a positive fashion), and the dimension of parental sense of belonging and reciprocity regarding the service.

An additional area for investigation is the role managers and supervisors have in employing staff who facilitate a conducive work environment. Furthermore, while a few studies have noted the importance of organisational factors, especially the way in which workers receive support, this has not been examined in relation to child neglect, an area in which service provider morale and optimism is likely to be very important.

In conclusion, the limited nature of the research on which to draw indicates that this area is ripe for further study. This includes additional qualitative and quantitative investigations on the association between positive relationships and the work environment. Exploring working relationships within a variety of settings may provide additional insights about the role of work environments in assisting parents to, as stated by one parent, "feel like I'm part of the furniture . . . [which] makes you feel that you *can* actually open up and talk".

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